



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Ozark-St. Francis National Forest
Sylamore Ranger District

1001 East Main Street
Mountain View AR 72560
870-269-3228 870-269-3000

File Code: 1950

Date: February 13, 2019

Dear Interested Public:

To improve habitat conditions, I am proposing prescribed burning and mechanical treatments on approximately 2,360 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands. I welcome your comments on what I am calling the *Stewart Fork Project*.

The *Stewart Fork Project* area is located within T-17N, R-13W, Sections 13, 23, 24 and 25 and T-17N, R-12W Sections 18, 19, 20, 29 and 30 in Baxter County, AR as shown on the attached vicinity map. The project area which is bound by Forest Service Road 1127 (Merrill Ridge Road) on the south and west, and a portion of State Highway 341 (Push Mountain Road) and Forest Service Road 1101 (McGowan Road) on the north. The eastern border of the project area is comprised in part by Forest Service Roads 91072C, 91081A, 91081F, and 91081E; the remainder runs through a portion of the Clifty Canyon Special Interest Area that contains 40 acres managed as Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA). Private lands occur outside the project area on the northeast, but no private land occurs within the project area.

The project area is mainly comprised of the dry oak forest woodland communities (60 percent) with dominant canopy species being white oak, northern red oak, and hickory. Shortleaf pine and pine-oak stands make up approximately 27 percent of the project area. The remaining stand types include 170 acres of oak-eastern red cedar, 44 acres of northern-red oak-hickory-yellow pine, and 21 acres of other hardwood-eastern red cedar. There are 14 wildlife openings within the project area that total 35 acres of open or non-forested land. In forested stands, shade tolerant species in the mid-story are dense and are out-competing regeneration of mast bearing trees for water, nutrients, space and sunlight. Open habitat conditions are provided by managed wildlife openings and small glades; however, encroaching eastern red cedar and other woody species have reduced the benefit these areas provide for some species. Fuel loads in the project area are heavy and host material for damaging insects and diseases is abundant within the project area due to down and dead trees, woody debris and trees damaged or stressed by ice accumulation in 2009.

No portion of the project area is designated as Wilderness, proposed Wilderness, a Wilderness study area, a National Recreation Area, or Research Natural Area or involves any area in which the activities being proposed would be inconsistent with the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/osfnf/landmanagement/planning>), laws or regulations. There are no areas designated as critical habitat and no areas proposed as critical habitat for federally listed threatened or endangered species on the Sylamore Ranger District. Leatherwood Wilderness and the Ozark Highlands Trail are located to the west of, but are not immediately adjacent to, the project area.



PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

This purpose of this initiative is to improve habitat conditions for native species, as identified in the Forest Plan. The activities proposed for the *Stewart Fork Project* are needed to respond to priorities and contribute to meeting Forest-Wide Objectives outlined in the Forest Plan regarding habitat management.

The management activities being proposed are reasonable, feasible, and consistent with the Clifty Canyon Special Interest Area Management Plan, as well as with priorities and objectives of the Forest Plan, including, but not limited to, improving forest health, enhancing rare and special communities (e.g. glades), and prescribed burning.

THE PROPOSED ACTION

The Proposed Action includes prescribed burning and mechanical treatments. It has been designed to comply with the requirements of the Forest Plan as well as all applicable federal, state and local laws. If selected for implementation, the Proposed Action would tentatively be scheduled to begin implementation in fiscal year 2019.

- Prescribed burning would be conducted on any or all NFS lands within the project area boundary.
- Burning would be implemented in either the dormant or the growing season; where applied, it would be done in accordance with a prescribed burning plan specific to the *Stewart Fork Project* area which would outline parameters for implementation.
- Existing roads and natural features form the project area boundaries and would be used as prescribed fire control lines. The IRA lacks roads or natural fire breaks; therefore, approximately 0.25 mile of fire containment line will be established by hand.
- Piled fuels within 25 feet of all identified butternut trees would be raked away.
- The perimeter of the burn would be ignited by hand; aerial ignition from helicopters would most likely be utilized on the interior of the treatment unit(s) to facilitate rapid smoke dispersal.
- Arkansas Forestry Commission Smoke Management Program guidelines (<https://www.agriculture.arkansas.gov/arkansas-voluntary-smoke-management-guidelines>) would be followed.

- Caves are known to exist in the project area; the prescribed burn plan would identify these sites as smoke sensitive targets.
- Conditions for burning would include selecting burning parameters that would prevent active combustion smoke and smoldering phase smoke from entering project area caves when bats are present.
- Mechanical treatments (shredding, chipping, chainsaw felling) would be done where needed within the project area to modify fuel structure and fire behavior, reduce stand density to improve growing conditions for residual stems, and/or to remove woody stems encroaching on open habitats (e.g. wildlife openings and glades).
- No mechanical treatments would be implemented within the portion of the project area that is managed as an Inventoried Roadless Area.
- No butternut trees would be cut.
- The Section 106 process of the National Historic Preservation Act shall be completed and known historic properties that are eligible, potentially eligible or have undetermined eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places would be marked and avoided prior to implementing management actions. Some heritage properties and their components may remain undetected, even within a survey area, for a variety of reasons. Should any actions inadvertently uncover a previously unrecorded archaeological site or object(s), work would be halted and the appropriate authorities would be notified. Activities at that location would not resume until the resource is adequately protected and agreed-upon mitigations are implemented with State Historic Preservation Officer and Tribal Historic Preservation Officer approvals.

Please note: No activities are proposed for implementation on private lands, and the rights of private land owners would not be affected by this undertaking.

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION FROM DOCUMENTATION IN AN ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OR ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

It is anticipated that this project may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement under FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 32.2 (6): *“Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.”* [36 CFR 220.6(e)(6)]

Unless it is determined a more extensive analysis in the form of an Environmental Assessment may be required, my decision regarding this proposal will be documented in a Decision Memo

and posted online on the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests' website. My decision will not be subject to administrative review.

HOW TO COMMENT

I will consider all comments that I receive, including those submitted anonymously. I do ask, however, that comments be submitted within the next 30 calendar days. Comments need to be relevant to effects of implementing the Proposed Action and should include supporting information for me to consider.

Please send written comments to me, District Ranger Jim McCoy, at the Sylamore Ranger District, 1001 East Main, Mountain View, AR 72560. Written comments may also be submitted via facsimile (FAX) at 870-269-3000 or may be hand-delivered at our district office between 7:30 am and 4:00 pm Monday through Friday excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc, .docx) to comments-southern-ozark-stfrancis-sylamore@fs.fed.us. Please state "Stewart Fork RxB" in the subject line when providing electronic comments. While providing a day-time telephone number with your comment is not required, doing so would be most helpful to me as I may wish to speak with you about your comment.

At this time, only the Proposed Action as described in this letter is being considered. If substantive information relevant to the impacts of implementing the Proposed Action is found that would preclude use of the aforementioned categorical exclusion, an Environmental Assessment may be done to determine if either an Environmental Impact Statement or a Finding of No Significant Impact should be prepared.

Please let me know if you have questions or are aware of something that I need to consider regarding the effects of implementing this Proposed Action. My work frequently requires me to be out of the office; to ensure your message gets to me, please contact our District NEPA Coordinator Jan Franks at (870) 269-3228 extension 3234 or (870) 213-6340. Thank you for your interest in the management of the Sylamore Ranger District.

Sincerely,



JIM MCCOY
District Ranger

Attachment: 1 map
jlf

